

Nose to the Grindstone, Head to the Stars – The Philadelphia Aesthetic

It's important to be here, rather than in New York . . . I'm sure I could have had a good company in New York, because I had more selection of dancers there. But I wanted to get away from the rat race. I wanted to get away from the stress. [Here] a dancer can relax and really develop their craft in an atmosphere of, as the kids say, family; of knowing that people care about what you do and how far you're going. Philadelphia is my home. I was born, bred, raised here. I studied here. I went to school here. I felt that if I had something to give to someone it should be to people in Philadelphia that I knew."

Joan Myers Brown

(In "The Philadanco Story," by Ann Dunn. (Asheville NC) *The Arts Journal*, February 1989, p.23)

Our style encompasses technique, it encompasses movement, it encompasses energy, it encompasses space, and it includes technique underneath all of that. And that's what used to burn Aunt Joan up, so she was like, well y'all just talk about energy, but look at the technique up under that energy!

Zane Booker

(Interview with Brenda Dixon Gottschild, 17 November 2008)

You're going to *feel* a performance by Philadanco. You're not just going to visually *see* a performance.

Tracy Vogt

(Interview with Brenda Dixon Gottschild, 11 January, 2009.)

Introduction

Let me begin with a backstory about the chapter title.

First night of the new year: January 1, 2010, and I am in the sound studio of radio station WRTI-FM with Kim Bears-Bailey and Chloe Davis of Philadanco, and J. Michael Harrison, emcee for "The Bridge," a crossover music program that explores the musical link spanning bebop to hip hop, and everything in between. The three of us are Mike's on-air guests tonight to promote the upcoming twenty-second annual International Association of Blacks in Dance Conference, for which Bears-Bailey and Davis are Co-Coordiators. (Bears-Bailey, former Danco dancer, is now the company's Assistant Artistic Director; Davis, in her fourth season as a Danco dancer, is also an events coordinator with a graduate degree in tourism and hospitality management.) Before we are interviewed, Harrison plays one of his inimitable musical sets, beginning with Gil Scott-Heron's "Peace Go With You, Brother," from the *Winter in America* recording— a perfect way to wish in the new year—and segueing into "Sacrifice," a cut from the *Phrenology* album by Philly's hip hop wizards, The Roots. As I listen to the words of "Sacrifice," amazed at what they have in common with the spirit of Danco, Joan Myers Brown, her school, her trials, her triumphs, I jot down those lyrics—"nose to the grindstone, head to the stars." Without their knowing it, The Roots are giving a thumbnail description of my topic for this chapter—that is, the unique spirit embodied in the community of people nurtured by black Philadelphia that has shaped and defined a singular aesthetic, as evidenced by Philadanco. Note: You don't have to be black to be a child of black Philadelphia. You may be a musician like Jewish-American Bobby Zankel, whose expression is an outpouring of this city's black-based jazz culture. Or a local music

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lover who grew and grooved to the Gamble and Huff “Philly Sound”. Or a dancer, writer, or rapper of the hip hop generation, either born here or, like Japanese-American Makoto Hirano, having moved here. It’s a tangible quotient, and it can be felt in the streets, on the radio, in the clubs, in the theaters, in church. The Roots exemplify this spirit, as does J. Michael Harrison—and Joan Myers Brown. These are the kind of people who chose to be and remain in Philadelphia. In 2009, and in spite of being the house band for the New-York-based “Late Night With Jimmy Fallon” show, most Roots members continued to live in Philly and engage in the grueling daily commute from Brotherly Love to Big Apple. In a *Philadelphia Inquirer* article Band member Questlove admitted that he loved his Philly studio and home so much that he was willing to do the daily round-trip and put up with sleep deprivation. Knuckles, a band member living in Landsdowne (a Philly suburb) with his wife and three children, declared his joy at leaving Manhattan every night and returning to home and family.ⁱ

Nose to the grindstone, head to the stars. That’s the spirit that pervades JB’s enterprises—her school, her company, her life: work your butt off, and keep your eyes on the prize. Another compelling line from “Sacrifice” says, “You need a heart that’s filled with music; if you use it, you can fly” This, too, characterizes not only the music of Philly—be it bebop or hiphop—but also its dance, be it the concert dance culture created and disseminated by JB or the grassroots styles that nurtured tap artists like LaVaughn Robinson and Germaine Ingram or hiphop choreographer Rennie Harris.

So here is my compass setting for navigating this chapter. I aim to get a handle on what constitutes a “Philadelphia aesthetic” in the concert dance legacy emerging from Philadanco and the city’s black community—a product that has been exported far and wide to dance companies populated by former “Danco-ites,” most notably the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. I will examine the critics, the voices of those dancers and choreographers interviewed for this project, and my own notes based on many years of observing the company in action.ⁱⁱ I interrogate the “Philly Sound” of Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff to ferret out consonances with the Philadelphia dance aesthetic in Philadanco. I attempt to locate and delineate particular elements of this aesthetic, and I conclude the chapter by describing how continuity of style is maintained through the conservatory tradition, the choice of choreographers, and by the force of those “recycled people” (to borrow Kim Bears Bailey’s phrase) who return to the fold to carry the torch. Philadelphia is one of the main hubs of dance activity in the USA—along with New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles—and, like the Philly Sound, the Philadanco style is a standard-setter beyond the regional borders of her mother city.

Rennie’s Ruminations – Laying the Foundation

Master innovator in moving hip hop dance from the streets to the concert stage, Rennie Harris is another dyed-in-the-wool Philadelphian. In my interview with him,

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the force of the city's attitude—*ATTITUDE*—came across, as Harris delineated that characteristic as an energy that charges all this city's endeavors, including sports, the arts, and everyday lifestyles. He didn't say it, but a subtext in Harris's argument is what I just suggested: the fact that Philadelphia, much more than, say, New York, is a *black* city, or a black-and-white city, with black folk, talk, and life an overarching presence embracing the entire city and its populace. His astute observations set the stage for the propositions carried by this chapter.

Asked what was the first impression that came to mind when he thought of Philadanco, he responded with one word: Philly:

Just Philly. You know, the embodiment of Philadelphia. And it's really strange 'cause even with the dancers that I worked with now, even the generations past the original, they still embody this hard core, this groundedness within their movement that separates them from their peers who present dance [in a similar style]—like Ailey or Cleo [Parker Robinson's company]. *Completely different* stylistically from those—just a completely different beast.

Harris continues in this vein, getting closer to the heart of the difference and unique status of this company, particularly in relation to its birthplace and home. He helps us understand the significance of *place* in creating institutions, while also giving the city and this dance company the characteristics and personality attributable to a living, breathing human being:

It could be the brand of training, it could be the brand of philosophy. Work ethic, you know. And although it seems like it's the same brand of training and work ethic that a lot of people share, other companies share, it isn't. It's almost like this fiber woven into something other than just the training. Where dancers are affected on personal levels you know, either positive or negative, they're affected in another way than, let's say, Ailey . . . It's like this little bit of something that's different in Philly. And I think it has to do with the energy of Philadelphia.

Harris's flow will be picked up again, but I interrupt it to call the reader's attention to a common occurrence. Like many others in the dance world, Harris uses the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT), based in New York City, as a frame of reference for talking about Philadanco. Actually, he has the authority to do so, having choreographed works for both ensembles. However, it must be reiterated that Judith Jamison, who celebrated her 20th anniversary as Artistic Director of AAADT in 2010, is herself a native Philadelphian, trained in the same studios and the same tradition as JB. Both women had the Philadelphia black community supporting them and instilling in them a homegrown work ethic and an urge to strive for excellence; both had a multitude of performance experiences as adolescents growing up in a community that took pride in its youthful achievers. The fact that the Ailey ensemble has been headed by a Philadelphian and, almost since its inception, has been populated by numerous former Philadanco dancers,

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indicates a deep connection—not necessarily publicly acknowledged—between the two institutions. I contend that the Philadanco-Philadelphia connection adds a certain accent—or twang—to the Ailey aesthetic. Since the 1970s days of Gary deLoatch, one of the first of JB’s dancers to move on to Ailey, the Danco dancers who have performed with that ensemble brought with them the excellence and particular strengths garnered from their Philadelphia training and inflected the Ailey company with their special contributions. In my interview with Deborah Manning St. Charles some of this information was revealed. A ballet instructor at JB’s Philadelphia School of Dance Arts (PSDA) since 1995 and one of the original members of Philadanco, Manning St. Charles, with JB’s blessing, left the company in 1981 to perform with AAADT, where she remained for 13 years. The Philadanco reputation was already an item among the company members, even before her arrival. In her words:

They had heard about these kids from Philadelphia, that these kids dance *holes* through the floor. They wanted to know who we were. Gary deLoatch was already there, and they’d ask him, “What is it with those Philly kids? They can do anything!” And Gary would say it was the Schuylkill punch!ⁱⁱⁱ

Debra Chase-Hicks danced with Philadanco from 1974-81. She and Manning St. Charles auditioned together and were accepted in the Ailey company at the same time. Chase-Hicks danced with Ailey from 1981-90, then returned home to Philadelphia and assumed the role of Philadanco’s rehearsal director in 1992, a position she has held since then. Her comments about the Ailey experience echo Manning St. Charles’s:

We were always “the Philadelphia kids.” I don’t know if the Philly kids had an edge, but we had a reputation for being what we call “on it.” For whatever you ask them to do they were gonna do it. That was one thing we were really proud of—that we would do anything, we could do anything! And that reputation followed after we left. I’m not patting my own back, but the reality of it is that every Philadelphia dancer that has come after that has had the same reputation—that they could do anything; that they’re moldable and pliable

Unquestionably, and despite this affinity, the two companies have developed in different directions, with the New York ensemble becoming ever larger in size and more of a corporate-driven organization, for better or worse. According to Nadine Patterson, Philadelphia-born-and-based videographer, “The spirit that they [Philadanco] bring to each piece is very, very different, whereas with Ailey, I feel like . . . you see the Ailey ‘thing’ in every piece they do With Danco, it’s like an actor being a character as opposed to being a star.”^{iv} Patterson’s comments pinpoint an ensemble concept that has been consciously worked on by artistic director JB and is, itself, a definable ethos that characterizes her company and differentiates it from others. Before continuing with Harris’s insights and the Philadelphia/Philadanco aesthetic, let’s look at a defining historical moment in contemporary pop music.

Philly Sound

“Mixing soft soul, gritty grooves, rhythms, strings and big band swing,” while “spinning simple truths in complex times,” is the description given at the online website for the “super deluxe 3 CD box set” reissue of Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff’s greatest hits. This legendary duo first met in the 1960s. With hits like “Me and Mrs. Jones,” “Back Stabbers,” “If You Don’t Know Me By Now,” “Love Train,” and “T.S.O.P.” (“The Sound of Philadelphia,” which became the legendary theme for the television show, *Soul Train*), they created what became known by the 1970s as the Philly Sound. In 1960 JB started the Philadelphia School of Dance Arts (PSDA) and began laying down the principles of a dance aesthetic that moved her to create the Philadelphia Dance Company a decade later. Music and dance from the black side of Philadelphia: two independent streams of artistic creation emanating from the same community, same culture, same city, same decades. There are other similarities in the visions and creations of Gamble/Huff and Joan Myers Brown.

Interviewed by Terry Gross for her National Public Radio program, “Fresh Air,” Gamble described the Philly Sound as funky-classical: it could “get down,” while simultaneously incorporating a fully orchestrated production using strings, oboes, and other symphonic instruments.^v At a time when public schools gave students the opportunity to study music, these composers played in school marching bands and were exposed to the range of music “that makes up a fantastic orchestra,” according to Huff. Like JB, their secondary education was “instrumental” in their artistic development. For her, it was the exposure to ballet during and immediately after high school (through Mrs. Lingenfelder and Antony Tudor—see Chapters One and Two). The Gamble/Huff profile resonates with that described by many jazz musicians in the swing era (1930s-40s), whose initiation into the field was on borrowed instruments loaned out from their local public schools in cities like Detroit, Washington DC, Kansas City, and Philadelphia. (And for me, growing up in Harlem in the 1950s, my introduction to modern dance was through an option in my public high school that allowed me to take dance instead of gym. The dance teacher had performed with the Martha Graham Dance Company in some minor capacity during the 1940s. Her influence on me was to shape the trajectory of my career, my life, thereafter.)

Inspired also by the generation directly preceding them, Gamble/Huff cited The Drifters as one of the first pop music groups in the 1950s to utilize strings and tympani, mentioning their hit, “There Goes My Baby,” as one of the first fully orchestrated pop songs. Also influenced by the likes of composers Burt Bacharach, Hal David, and (Jerry) Lieber and (Mike) Stoller, this Philadelphia duo was able to create their own unique sound from a variety of sources. By 1971 the team co-founded Philadelphia International Records, their shelter for the Philly Sound. Gamble/Huff’s show business influences can be equated with JB’s years of hoofing and choreographing in the entertainment industry for people like Cab Calloway,

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Sammy Davis, Jr. and Pearl Bailey and, likewise, creating her own unique style from a variety of sources and founding Philadanco in 1970. The commanding stage presence of her dance company parallels the staying power of Gamble/Huff's greatest hits. Both Gamble/Huff and JB show an uncanny sense of knowing and shaping what will please their audiences. For the music world and the dance world, these Philadelphians came up with a new product—their own brand of smooth-but-funky, sassy but classy art-cum-entertainment.

In 1999 Philadanco and Philadelphia International Records were united in *Tribute*, a dance choreographed by Dwight Rhoden to the music of Gamble and Huff to celebrate both Philadelphia institutions.

Toward the end of this radio interview, Gross asks the team when and why their “glory days” ended. Gamble astutely explains that music styles evolve and devolve to other forms, especially after the meteoric success of a phenomenon like the Philly Sound. He sums up by saying they had “a good almost twenty-year run. Strong run, you know,” and he was relieved not to be obliged to continue the grueling schedule of having to put out twelve to thirteen albums per year. Here's where the Gamble/Huff and Joan Myers Brown stories diverge: modern dance companies don't have “hits.” They may have one or two dances integrally associated with their ensemble, as is the case with Ailey's *Revelations*. With some luck and a lot of hard work, an ensemble might continue to have a shelf life, even after the demise of its founder. Again, AAADT offers a case in point. It is a testament to JB's commitment and perseverance that Philadanco has operated continuously over the past forty years and made the commitment, through thick and thin, to paying its dancers a year-round salary—one of the first and few regional companies, black or white, to do so. All the while she continued to shape and refine the company's aesthetic. She took what she learned in show business and put that knowledge to work in the service of creating modern ballets for the concert stage. In doing so, she brought a new life and a unique Philadelphia twist and verve to the dance world.

The Gamble/Huff regime was upended by the emergence of hip hop. But here, again, a Philadelphia force was an essential ingredient in the evolution of a new musical form. In their own way, The Roots represent the millennial Philly Sound and, like Gamble/Huff, have a background in a diverse range of musical genres, as is shown by the selections they choose in their capacity as house band for the Jimmy Fallon show. The Philly Sound was a music of lush orchestration wedded to a sensual sound by musicians and composers trained in both grassroots African American genres—rhythm and blues, gospel, jazz—and European orchestral music. The same holds true for the Philadelphia dance aesthetic. It is a combination of a strong ballet and modern dance technique orchestrated by a “conductor” wielding an African American baton. It is professionalism and *attitude*, tempered by heart and soul or—to borrow New York Times dance reviewer Anna Kisselgoff's term—kinetic empathy.^{vi}

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In 1997 Bing Mark, a Philadelphia arts critic, wrote a glowing review of Philadanco's fall home season in the (Monday) October 27 issue of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Titled "Artful Choreography Adds Depth to Pop Tunes," the article described the concert as "a 100 percent performance from a company that makes them look routine." The concert itself was titled "In the Black Tradition," and included Talley Beatty's *Pretty Is Skin Deep, Ugly is to the Bone* (1976), with music by Quincy Jones and Earth, Wind, and Fire; Milton Myers's *Love 'N Pain* (1992), to seven songs interpreted by Aretha Franklin; and George Faison's *Suite Otis* (1971), to six Otis Redding songs. The program also included Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's *The Walkin, Talkin, Signifyin Blues Hips, Lowdown Throwdown* (1996). To wind up his comments, and reflective of his title, Mark concluded:

The quick portraits of *Love 'N Pain* and *Suite Otis* show a complex understanding of how choreography can inflect popular music. After Philadanco teaches us how to listen, both to history and the three-minute pop song, we somehow understand both better.^{vii}

Like the Philly Sound of Gamble and Huff, JB and her Philadelphia Dance Company offer us a depth of experience and a new way of seeing. Let us say that Philadanco is the Philly Sound in motion, and, like the Gamble/Huff innovation, a gift from Philadelphia to the arts and entertainment world.

The Philadelphia Dance Aesthetic

Used as a noun, the word "aesthetic" is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "a set of principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty." The aesthetic criteria laid out in this section can also be considered the building blocks of what we could call the "Philadelphia style," or the "Philadelphia School" (in the same sense that we talk about a New York School of painting). However, I believe the phrase "Philadelphia aesthetic" or "Philadelphia dance aesthetic" most aptly fits what it is I am attempting to describe. Taken in tandem, a combination of elements defines this phenomenon and gives it the unique character that makes it what it is. They are

- 1) Philadelphia "attitude"
 - a) toughness
 - b) raw energy
 - c) work ethic
 - d) Southern/small-town etiquette
- 2) Strong technique training, with ballet at the forefront
- 3) Ensemble emphasis
- 4) Rigorous professionalism
 - a) directness
 - b) precision
 - c) do-or-die dancing
 - d) work ethic, revisited

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- 5) A show-biz élan on the concert stage
- 6) African American old-school elegance

It's important for the reader to realize that the components of the Philadelphia dance aesthetic are interlocking principles that overlap and blend. I can talk about toughness, raw energy, rigorous professionalism, black elegance, and so on as though they are separate entities—that's what must be done to tease out characteristics and to have a discussion. However, the reality of how they play out in the dynamic realm of real life, flesh-and-blood experience is not as disembodied concepts but embedded processes that are linked to one another, with no clear boundaries separating them. That said, and at the risk of waxing pedantic—or pedestrian—let's take a closer look at each of these characteristics.

1) The Philadelphia Attitude. Shared by the city as a whole, the first principle of the Philadelphia dance aesthetic is this ineffable quality that I will try to pin down. What I found, on moving here from Manhattan in 1982, was that I heard the word, 'attitude,' a lot more than I'd heard it used in the Big Apple. Often it was pronounced in a decidedly regional fashion that almost sounded French—as in 'atty-tood,' with the accent placed on the final syllable, and the 't's' in the first syllable clearly enunciated. So, already in its pronunciation and stress, the term took on a sound that stood in contrast to the pronunciation I was accustomed to. As in common usage, the term could indicate a special way of doing things and point to negative or affirmative behaviors. What became clear was that this thing called 'attitude' was a characteristic deemed important in the Philly worldview and, most certainly, in the city's African American communities. So, even though I am deconstructing and defining attitude specifically in relation to dance, these are characteristics of the city itself.

Rennie Harris is somewhat of a sage when it comes to Philadelphia matters, and he offered further ruminations on the character of his native city, speculating on the Philadelphia toughness and energy/synergy as mother to the Philadanco personality and to Philadelphians' peculiar relationship to sports. (And this is a city that is obsessed with its athletic teams.^{viii} Philadelphia's sports fans are known for being up there with the roughest and toughest, ready even to turn on their own teams when they're losing.) Moving seamlessly between practical, philosophical, and mystical thought, he describes this intensity as a

hard core dynamic. . . in New York you have these places where you can layer off and feel the energy and then go out [somewhere else] and it's almost like you're not even in New York. But in Philly it's that same energy everywhere you go, geographically we have these vortexes, these little pockets of energy. . . there's one over at the Art Museum, and another in the Northeast, this is the story I heard. So we get pinned with this sort of energy. And then there's the little park over by Fifth Street that is actually a cemetery, but they made it into a park, they didn't move the bodies. So you have that energy, too. It's an old city. . . .

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This kind of energy kinda keeps us in Philadelphia, and people who come to Philadelphia get caught in it too. You may be from another place, but you come, you get engulfed with that. You begin to think that certain way. It's like a breeding ground for these artists who hone their craft in a way that is way beyond just getting started. The atmosphere itself challenges them to make sure they rise to a certain level. And this energy/synergy thing that Philadelphia has is a major reason why Danco is the way it is. So it makes sense to me that Danco is at the level that it is. Because it's hard core, too!

Like, they say if you make it in New York: no—if you make it in *Philadelphia* you have made it, you can make it anywhere!

He doesn't describe this constellation of elements as good, bad, better or worse than the pulse of any other city—just different, just itself; and it's about a toughness, a relentless energy, and a strong work ethic. His observations and musings stand on their own strength, coming from a native son who cut his eye teeth and sharpened his skills on the energies he talks about and the legacies that brought him this far. They provide valuable clues in my quest to locate the qualities that define the Philadelphia aesthetic embodied in the organizations created by Joan Myers Brown.

Parsing its components, I begin with *toughness*, which translates as urban electricity in the philosophy and bodies of Philadanco. But first, here's an anecdote about Harris's behavior when he was a burgeoning hip hop dancer in the 1980s. He described what he used to do in preparation for a performance, or even just for an evening hanging out (and going to a club or being seen in public is, of course, a level of performance, in and of itself). The picture he limns says volumes about urban electricity, toughness, resilience, putting on a good face, "faking it 'till you make it":

Harris: When we were younger, you couldn't be caught dead talking about going performing [if you] weren't tight in our uniforms, weren't together, clean, and ironed. I used to iron my money and put starch on it. My mom used to be like, "Boy, why you using my starch up?!" I'd be on the third floor—S-s-s-t-s-s-h [ironing]!

BDG: Ironing your *money*???

Harris: Ironing my money so it could be, feel like it's new—came from the bank.

BDG: How beautiful—how incredible!

Harris: So, you know what I mean. That's what you did with your clothes, that's what you did with—Boom!

This is the attitude that says, "you bring the whole person to the performance moment, and every detail of your person is part of your personhood, and part of your presentation."

Another example of that toughness is evident in an electrifying piece that Harris choreographed for Philadanco. Titled *The Philadelphia Experiment*, this work explodes like gangbusters from one taut, pressed, dance image to the next, pushing

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the dancers to embody their African-ness (as in, “we are Africans who happened, by Middle Passage, to be in America”) by doing a demanding battery of hip hop and social dance moves. The piece melds together Harris’s sense of the city with historical and contemporary events, some in taped voiceovers and visual projections—all filtered through the dancing bodies of the Danco ensemble. Thus, we hear the voice of Ramona Africa, one of the leaders and few survivors of the MOVE movement, describing the holocaust that burned blocks of Philadelphia houses in a predominantly black neighborhood, including the MOVE house, and killed many of its members and destroyed their movement.^{ix} We see photos of the constitution juxtaposed with ironic comments on the lack of constitutional freedoms for African Americans. Homeless black men bed down on the street next to newspaper kiosks. Although it’s been taken on tour, this dance will probably never be performed by any other company: it was created by a Philadelphian for a Philadelphia company to say something special about Philadelphia.

Harris talked also about the attitude of the Danco dancers, learning for the concert stage a dance based on the hip hop vocabulary. Although they belong to a generation of dancers who grew up dancing this genre in social situations, this was a new experience, having a hip hop ballet made for them to perform professionally. Harris’s description of their reaction to this new-for-the-stage vocabulary again says a mouthful about this Philly toughness, when compared with reactions to his choreography by companies based in other cities. He described the Danco experience in contrast to the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company (DCDC) and the Ailey ensemble. In those cases, there was excitement and even well-mannered enthusiasm:

Any other company [is] like, “Hey, what’s up, Yo, I’m excited about the blah, blah, blah, the dit dah. Oh, wow. . .” [But with Danco] I have to start from the gate, from the beginning, and say “This is what it is.” And that’s clearly a Philly thing—clearly it was a Philly company. I came in, and they had the Philly attitude—like “Yeah? So? So get on with it!” This is just Philly.

Unlike ensembles in other urban centers, the Danco dancers were not ready to take Harris on faith or trust and, acting super-cool or nonchalant, sat on any expression of enthusiasm. He had to prove himself to them, when perhaps he assumed that, being a Philadelphian himself, it would be easy going. So toughness means just that: a tough attitude, a “prove yourself to me” and “take no prisoners” stance.

For another take on *toughness*, let us turn to JB’s professional perspective:

I try not to be as tough as I used to be because I know what it takes . . . for a black dancer. Going into an audition there are usually 500 dancers for one role. And if there are going to be 10 spots in a Broadway show or . . . a company, there may be only one spot for a black person. So the dancers really have to be tough and . . . ready to take on what comes. They have to be ready to do everything that’s given out to them.^x

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Some readers may feel that this is no different than what every black dancer must know. However, because JB makes a point of teaching her dancers about the black dancers of previous generations on whose shoulders they are standing—and the history of discrimination and lack of opportunities for them—her insistence on toughness, precision, technical excellence, and so on, takes on a special urgency. Not every director imparts this background information.

When I first began to think about *raw energy*, I didn't realize why my mind jumped to Robert Farris Thompson, but it was actually intuition leading me to Thompson's concept of *ephebism*. Used in his *African Art in Motion*^{xi} to explain one of the ten "canons of fine form" that he erects in his theory of African aesthetics, the term comes from the ancient Greek word *ephebe*, meaning youth. I use it, as Thompson does, to embrace a network of interfacing attributes associated with the brashness of growing up and the boldness of innocence. Ephebism implies vitality, flexibility, drive, attack, speed, sharpness, and force, if you will. This is the energy that JB looks for when she auditions dancers. Moreover, it is trained into the Danco dancer and is one of her defining, distinguishing traits. What would be the closing number—the big, energetic finale—on any other dance program is the opener for a Philadanco program, and the energy just builds from there. In my interview with Elisabeth Bell, Danco dancer from 2004 to 2007 (she was living in Hamburg, Germany and dancing in *The Lion King* when I interviewed her in 2008), she talked about this special Danco attribute:

Danco has a rawness to it, and I think because JB's still at the helm and still can guide its artistic direction. And she's adamant. The fact that I could do four years of Danco, that I could do a Talley Beatty or a Joyce Trisler work and then go to Ron Brown—just to have this versatility with what I can do. And then to know—because I was also an asthmatic—to know that I could do four ballets in an evening! After this, I can't stand to be around dancers that complain [about a heavy schedule]. I mean, hard is always relative. Hard is always relative to where you are in time and what you're experiencing. But, I mean, the Danco rep was *hard*.

Bell is correct in attributing this quality to JB's steadfast leadership. And, indeed, ephebistic energy was the starting point for her company back in the 1970s, and became its trademark and label. It was a company of very young dancers, some still in their teens, who had energy to burn. Even in the millennial era the company radiates a youthful aura. "They usually range in age between twenty and thirty, and I really consider that a young company," says Zane Booker. "So their character," he continues,

involves all of that that is used—their insecurity, their assuredness, the artistic level, the emphasis on technique, sometimes the over-nuance. It's a *grooming ground*. In a company [like Danco] that's smaller, the grooming process continues and continues. . . . Everybody has to be a soloist because

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it's such a small company, or at least you work to that level. Everybody has to step up to the plate.

Because this is not a company of twenty-five or thirty-five dancers with second casts, understudies, and people who know they are destined for a life in the corps and will never be a soloist, Booker asserts that there is “a different dynamic.” That's what the “grooming process” is about, and why it continues. And this dynamic keeps a vibrant, vital energy alive, a democratic sense that everyone can be a star as well as a member of the corps, and “we're all in it together.” Booker's observations resonate with and touch on almost all the other Philadanco aesthetic principles: work ethic, strong technique, ensemble emphasis, rigorous professionalism.

A toughness and raw energy was remembered by Deborah Manning St. Charles, one of the original members of Philadanco, who began as a teenager. She had this to say about her Philadelphia training—a testament to commitment and vitality:

Danco *prepared* me to dance for Ailey. Because when we were first starting out there weren't that many performances. We *trained!* We trained like *horses—Clydesdales*—that's what we were! I mean, we trained! We had ballet on Monday, jazz on Tuesday, such-and-such on Wednesday—Dunham, Horton.^{xiii} Sunday mornings we were here 10 o'clock in the morning till 10 o'clock at night. And we would rehearse, rehearse, rehearse, down to the fingertip. If it wasn't right, you had to repeat it.

Claiming that dancing with the Ailey company was easy, compared to dancing with Philadanco, Debora Chase-Hicks, another Danco-Ailey-Danco returnee, shared memories that jibe with Bell's and Manning St. Charles's:

I didn't dance as hard with the Ailey company, even though I was in every number by the time I was in my third year, because we'd only do four pieces a night. [Back then] with Danco we did seven! We would do Talley [Beatty], Gene [Hill Sagan], Harold Pearson, Billy Wilson—and these pieces were *hard*. And most were full company pieces. In the Ailey company you'd have your two leads and then you'd go in and out, in and out, so it wasn't as hard. Here [with Danco], you had to be “on it” all the time.

Taken together, toughness and raw energy say a mouthful about what is needed with regard to the next principle, the *work ethic*. Harris's, Bell's, Chase-Hicks's and Manning St. Charles's statements all testify to a strong sense of having to get the job done, regardless of what it takes. Moving here from Manhattan to assume a full-time teaching position at Temple University, I sensed a different kind of commitment to work. It wasn't that people didn't hang out or have fun; but after working hours the tenor of the downtown area (charmingly called “Center City”) was subdued. Block upon block was quiet. The city is revved up during business hours, but only certain areas are lively after the evening rush hour. Although there is South Street (and Main Street, in the Manayunk area of the city), there is no

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central area to compare with Times Square, no Upper East Side singles scene, no East or West Village night life. And there are row after row of residential houses in every section of the city, which is how Philadelphia was given nicknames such as the “city of homes” and the “city of neighborhoods.” Unlike New York or Chicago, where some area keeps jumping till the crack of dawn, this city sleeps! At moments of my greatest homesickness, having moved from New York’s Greenwich Village to live in the Germantown area, Philadelphia felt like a workaday town. I began to get a whiff of the particular energy/synergy Harris talked about but sensed it was mainly channeled into work. I felt the striving, although I wasn’t sure it was a struggle for the excellence he described. But it was a palpable presence, whether the work was artistic and creative, or manual, or bureaucratic. People seemed to take their positions soberly, whether they were in a profession, a vocation, a sinecure, or a temporary stopover—and whether they liked their jobs or not. (And frequently it was job dissatisfaction that accounted for the Philly “atty-tood.”) There was an industriousness that was different from the headset in New York: Philadelphians honing their crafts, with nose to the grindstone and maybe head to the stars . . .

Geography may have something to do with it. Pennsylvania shares tri-state status with Delaware and Maryland. (My previous tri-state configuration was New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut—Yankee territory.) It’s a mid-Atlantic state, not really the Northeast. Indeed, in African American milieus, the city of Philadelphia has been known as ‘up South,’ because of its adherence to ‘down South’ traditions and due also to the state’s strategic North-South location. And there is definitely a tinge of the next principle, *Southern and/or small-town etiquette*, in the manners and mores of the black community. Philly has a provincial familiarity, couched in an urban setting. A good example: ever since we moved here, children and young adults in the black communities, as well as my daughter’s Philly friends, insist on calling me Miss Brenda (or Mrs. Gottschild—which is how Rennie Harris still addresses me—or Dr. Brenda, or Dr. Gottschild), instead of the informal, first-name familiarity used by her friends and other young people in New York City. In what I characterize as Southern etiquette, these young people, raised ‘up North’ but honoring that tradition, couldn’t conceive of addressing me without preceding my given name with an honorific. Likewise, Joan Myers Brown is identified by almost everyone in black Philadelphia as either ‘Aunt Joan,’ ‘Miss Joan,’ or even ‘Mom.’

This etiquette goes further than simply how one is addressed. It’s about a community caring for its members. *Eureka*—that’s what separates New York’s and Philly’s black communities: Philadelphia functions like an amalgam of small southern towns, where the inhabitants know and look out for one another. This may be true for some of the city’s white communities as well, I don’t know. And it’s true for lots of recent immigrant communities everywhere across the nation. Nevertheless, it’s an inherited trait in the city’s traditional African American community. ‘Guru’ Rennie Harris declared that “from my community [growing up in North Philly], I’m used to the lady down the street saying to me, Oh, you have a talent show next week, so here’s some money to help you out for uniforms, y’all go buy t-shirts.” And JB lives, extends, and personifies this tradition. Harris continues:

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So Joan, Ms. Myers, you know, extended her hand out to me on so many levels, in so many ways. In a way she's been guardian angel'ing us, in a way I didn't even know. . . . She'd pull me in, and say [something like] "you know this is what I heard, just gonna let you know, and you need to get this together." Boom, boom, boom. Right. "If you need my so and so, you need my accountant, need my so and so let us know. . . ." And we sat down with Ms. Engrid [Engrid Bullock, Philadanco's Executive Administrative Assistant]: "Yeah, we'll let you know, but this is what we do." And there was nobody [else helping us out]—and no fault to any of the presenters in that way other than, just, again, it's a Western [read "white"]way of thinking, assuming that we know. . . .

What Harris says goes back to that 'down South/up South' etiquette thing of taking care of one's own as though we are all family, or strangers in a strange land. When one of us gets the hang of the game, it's our duty to teach it to our brothers and sisters. It takes a village to raise a child! JB's guiding model has always been this Afrocentric tradition of extended family. Harris recognized that and didn't even fault the (white) presenters who didn't help him when he was starting out: he just attributed it to a Western way of doing things. It's also interesting that, in this part of the interview, Harris reverted to exactly what I described and addressed both JB and Bullock as 'Ms.' (or, as it would be enunciated: 'Mizz'). It is important to remember that, in the same way that JB took Harris under her wing, she'd been "angel-ed" by Marion Cuyjet who, in turn, had been guided by Essie Marie Dorsey. It's the tradition and legacy of the Philadelphia black community.

This completes the fundamentals of *Philadelphia Attitude* that are relevant to shaping the character of JB's school, ensemble, and aesthetic. Toughness, energy, rawness, a strong work ethic, and a Southern-style etiquette are intrinsic to her artistic and administrative processes. Interacting with the Philadanco/PSDA principles that follow, altogether they create the Philadelphia dance aesthetic as embedded in JB's legacy.

2) *Strong technical training, with ballet at the forefront*, is the foundation upon which JB constructed her edifice. This is the first step toward instilling the Philadelphia aesthetic in the Danco dancer. How to get there? Through toughness, raw energy, and a solid work ethic. Her tastes were shaped by the ballet-inflected world that nurtured her. As detailed in earlier chapters, although tap, jazz, and African dance were in the curriculum at the schools where she studied and later taught, ballet was the strongest influence on her artistic development. Had the opportunity been available, she probably would have joined a ballet company, in spite of her relatively late start in studying the technique. After studying with Virginia Lingenfelder through the ballet club in high school, she studied for two years with Antony Tudor and performed in a version of *Les Sylphides* that he choreographed for the (Philadelphia) Ballet Guild. She carried what she learned from him into her own classrooms and still espouses ballet according to the maestro's methods. Following

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the conventional model set up by ballet companies, the Philadanco dancers are required to take company classes given at the school. (Even though the Philadelphia School of Dance Arts (PSDA) is a separate entity from the Philadelphia Dance Company, the two organizations share the same three-storey building and studio spaces.)

What is noteworthy is how few people know that, not only did JB study with Tudor, but Tudor's passing on to her the Cecchetti legacy is one of the foundations of her artistic vision.^{xiii} Moreover, this particular technique resonates (not in content, but in principle) with the artistic criteria that are basic components of the African American aesthetic and, thus, part of JB's heritage. How? Why? Because the Cecchetti technique emphasized expressivity, musicality, virtuosity, precision, and strength—all of which are basic tenets of an African American arts tradition. Agrippina Vaganova, another of Cecchetti's students, went on to develop her own technique that veered more toward a scientific, anatomical approach to the ballet body. Her methods might not have been as fruitful amongst the black Philadelphia dancers studying ballet in the post-World War II era. So it was a fortunate coincidence that Tudor, a white Englishman, was the teacher who came to Philadelphia in the late 1940's-early 1950's and nurtured a uniquely talented group of black ballet hopefuls, Joan Myers Brown being one of them. A match was made for life and was instrumental in the formation of a school and a dance company of international repute. The popularity of the Cecchetti technique has waned, and the Philadanco/PSDA ballet classes taught today are in the style of the now popular Russian school. Nevertheless, this little piece of Philadelphia dance history—essential to understanding the Philadanco/Philadelphia dance aesthetic—has remained hidden for decades.

But the Danco training doesn't stop at ballet. These dancers are versed in modern and jazz as well. In 1990, at their 20th anniversary Joyce Theater New York season, *New York Times* critic Jennifer Dunning characterized them as moving with "... the clarity and the pulled-up look of ballet dancers, the stretch and the direct emotional commitment of modern dancers and the sharp attack of jazz dancers."^{xiv} In 1996, reviewing Danco's July 22-27 1996 Joyce season, the *Backstage* writer pointed out, in discussing Donald Byrd's *Everybody*, their "... exceptional training in classical ballet. There are even two sets of breathtaking *adagios* which would do credit to any major ballet company."^{xv} And *The Royal Gazette* (Bermuda) critic commented on the "... strength and precision of this company's technical training that cares as much about line and epaulement as it does about the admittedly spectacular leg and foot work." In the same review, and hitting the nail on the head, the writer also praises Milton Myers's *Variation #1*, which she describes as "a thrilling spectacle in which the freedom of the jazz idiom is rooted in the discipline of classical technique."^{xvi} This is one of the many reasons why JB engaged Myers as the company's resident choreographer: he knows how to use the company's strengths to best advantage, and he choreographs accordingly.

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Choreographer and former Danco Dancer Zane Booker articulates a noteworthy component of the Danco technical brilliance, which he calls its “moving technique”:

You know, a contraction in Talley [Beatty] is not different from a contraction in a [Martha] Graham class. It has to be that deep. Now, the way we do it and the way we move is the other part of Danco, the energy that we can move across the stage with. The moving technique would be a signature for Philadanco. I don't know if that kind of energy and that kind of commitment and that kind of power is found in other companies. [We have it] because of what [we] choose to dance. If pieces like that are the bulk of our rep, then we become really good at doing pieces like that. And I think that's how the vocabulary or the tradition or the style is grown.

Booker continued in this vein and asserted that these dancers “. . . use space in the most incredibly dynamic way. I don't know a lot of companies that can use space to move in that way.” What he's addressing is a subtle concept that dancers may know about but may be unable to articulate. An accomplished dancer must have the talent to move and articulate her body. On top of this, the adept dancer will have mastered the talent of also moving with and through the space, or actually moving the space, so that her dancing body makes the space dance in partnership with her. It is a dynamic partnership with the stage: the body not only makes shapes, but shapes the space. Booker's observations reinforce my assessment of Danco's rationale in maintaining a choreographer like Myers. He and Beatty represent, respectively, the new and old generations of dance makers whose deep understanding of this company made the dancers grow while enabling the choreographers to create some of their strongest works.

Does the dancer come to Philadanco with this acumen, or is the training responsible? JB seeks out dancers with this potential at company auditions, but that seed must be nurtured through *grooming*, to use Booker's word. Myers claims that Danco-ites are “strong, pure movers. And they have a fierceness about them. Some come in with it, but it's not fully developed. Hope [Boykin] came in and she had it, but it was developed in this company.” Former company member Tracy Vogt laughed as she told the story of how she was “spotted” at a master class in such a way as to make her want to be in the company: “Philadanco came to Erie, Pennsylvania and I was at the Lake Erie Ballet school at the time. They taught a Dunham master class and in the class Kim Bears-Bailey singled me out and made me go back by myself and said, ‘That's the way you should do it,’ and right then and there I knew that's where I needed to be!” Asked why she thought she'd been singled out, Vogt's response is telling. She claims, with a chuckle, “I had a little pizzazz, I'm a little spicier than most normal people! I had the energy and the passion. I just didn't have the technique yet.” She'd been studying dance since she was two years old and was on scholarship at the ballet school in Erie, so Vogt certainly was not unskilled, technically speaking. She didn't have that special Danco technique, but she had that spark which was a clue that it could be brought out of, or put into, her. According to Myers,

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Joan tends to pick dancers that can really see movement and interpret it. Because sometimes when we're having auditions, I may question, or I may see someone, and Joan doesn't see it the same way –or even Debbie [Deborah Chase-Hicks], and we see differently, but ultimately, she's right. As we get to watch them, we know that she was right! But I think that the dancers in Danco are magnificent movers, and they don't tend to put on top of it what isn't there. They can put themselves in it, but they will reproduce what you've asked them to do in terms of movement.

What Myers describes is every choreographer's dream: that the dancers will do the movement the choreographer intended, in the way (s)he dreamed of it being accomplished.^{xvii}

3) *Ensemble Emphasis*. When I interviewed her in May 1985, JB had this to say in response to the question, what makes a good dancer:

I like a dancer with a good facility who is able to get along with her peers—no animosity and jealousy—a person who doesn't create problems in themselves and other people. I think the most important thing is dedication to their craft. They should have the attitude of wanting to give all and being totally committed to what they're doing.

Her declaration is a manifesto of sorts and contains all the conditioning forces of an aesthetic listed in this chapter: work ethic, rigorous professionalism, strong technique, and so on. When I found this statement, culled from those early interviews, I was impressed by the fact that JB cites craft—rather than art—as central. This, again, suggests work ethic. Do-or-die dancing, passion, and right attitude are the subject of her final sentence. This paragraph is her mission statement for ensemble dancing.

From its inception back in 1970, Philadanco has always included dancers who represented a range of human diversity. Be they tall or short, long-legged or grounded, stocky or slim, black, brown, or white, talented dancers of varied body types have found a home in this company. And the amazing part is, without erasing their differences but through strong training in technique and style, these artists learn to move together, to look like and gel as an ensemble; the difference in body types is what makes the ensemble emphasis all the more remarkable. Traditionally, to have an ensemble—here meaning dancers able to perform effectively together in unison as a group, rather than as soloists—an artistic director or choreographer looks for dancers who are similar: all the women around a certain height, with similar line and proportions, skin color, and so on—so that they meld into one. Not so for the Philadelphia Dance Company. Rather than similarity of appearance, Danco's ensemble quality is based on unity of purpose, as a result of the Danco aesthetic having been instilled in the dancers through training, company classes, and rehearsals, rehearsals, rehearsals. Danco is simultaneously star-studded with

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no stars, and a company of ensemble dancers who have retained their individuality. Its members can interchangeably perform a solo or dance in a trio, quintet, or unison line, doing whatever is necessary. The ensemble emphasis prepares them to do anything and everything. So, on a given evening, a dancer might have a solo or pas de deux in a Christopher Huggins choreography, followed by a minor role in Rennie Harris's piece and also perform in two additional ballets on the same program. Dancers understudy each others' roles. (This is partly out of necessity in most small companies: without enough dancers to have two separate full casts, everyone has to know all roles in case someone is injured and must be replaced.) When the company performed Donald Byrd's *Bamm* in Bermuda in 1998, the local reviewer commented that "... the emphasis is on the electrifying discipline of the ensemble rather than on individual dancers."^{xviii} In 1995 the *Village Voice* said they were "... a company of stars who don't act like stars—performers whose blazing physicality and commitment light up the stage."^{xix}

Again, the choice of choreographers supports the development of ensemble dancing. By their very nature, dances such as *The Philadelphia Experiment*, Huggins's *Enemy Behind The Gates*, Byrd's *Bamm*, Myers's full range of works for the company—in fact, almost all the dances commissioned by JB—support this ideal. For the same June 20-25 1995 Joyce season, *Dance Magazine* commented that Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's *The Walkin, Talkin, Signifyin Blues Hips, Sacred Hips, Lowdown Throwdown*, "... is amazingly lacking in ego. It provides the dancers with a context in which to strut their stuff and represent the complexity of women's lives."^{xx} And that's the point for this ensemble: performers with distinct personalities and talents are needed who also have the ability to drop ego and work for the good of the whole dance and the whole cast. This is a quality that Danco can be proud of, thanks to JB's perspicacity.

Kim Bears-Bailey began as an apprentice with the company in 1981 and was a Philadanco dancer until her retirement in 2000, when she assumed the role of Assistant Artistic Director. Her recollections eloquently describe the communal, ensemble spirit that enveloped her as a young dancer. She points out that the work of Gene Hill Sagan, Danco's first choreographer-in-residence, not only allowed but actually "... provoked trust. There was always the sense of something that had to connect you so strongly with the person that you were dancing with . . . I got to really feel like I was a part of somebody else's soul, doing Gene's work." Talking about *Bamm*, the Donald Byrd work, she continued,

When Donald Byrd came here, he did a collaborative work on Danco and Dayton [Contemporary Dance Company]. He based the type of choreography and the work that he did on each company by the energy and the essence that he got from each company. And if you look at the work, Danco's part is very connected. There's a trust factor there. They're throwing bodies; people are catching people. There's a lot of hands-on partnering stuff. There's this connective stuff he was inspired to do that was a sense of what

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he got from our dancers. When you look at Dayton's part, it was a bit more detached, not much of a trust factor. There was this, this window that he felt like he could go inside of with us that maybe wasn't as accessible from that company.

The trust and creativity Bears-Bailey describes are the result of ensemble-building, an essential component in the aesthetic edifice constructed by Joan Myers Brown.

4) *Rigorous Professionalism*. Like the *Philadelphia Attitude*, this principle involves a battery of characteristics. It goes without saying that any dance company worth its salt must be rigorously professional in order to survive. We are a field renowned for its hard taskmasters. Each ensemble takes on this responsibility in its own unique fashion, and professionalism grows and evolves with the development and continuity of the organization.

The principle of *Directness* resonates with JB's demand for a rigorous professionalism. As Elisabeth Bell put it, "her message could be harsh. In the end, I have to say she may not always be tactful, but she was always truthful." It is noteworthy that Bell uttered these words in loving tones, as though she were speaking of a family elder. And, in fact, she was, because JB has always conducted her businesses as an extended family (see Prologue). It is also remarkable how much her directness has been extolled by the dancers who work with her. For some, she is "telling it like it is," while other professionals in high places beat around the bush, perhaps particularly in dealing with black dancers. Zane Booker appreciated Brown's eye for detail and amazing specificity in directing choreographers to fix what needs fixing:

She appreciates all those things that go into the craft of choreography, and she can call you on it, you know what I mean? When I did one piece she said, "You know, they're not really doing that section well. It looks kind of out of place." And, really, it did. And every time I looked at it, there was this place where I was like---aaarrggghhhh! Her seeing the weakness in the piece made me have to fix it. So the standard of the piece came up, with just that one little note. She didn't [have to] go on about the whole piece.

JB's strength and straightforward presentation of self inspire the best in her dancers but can also be intimidating. Although she is slightly-built and of medium height, her charismatic presence cannot be ignored. Tracy Vogt put it this way:

Vogt: You set Joan Myers Brown in the front of the room, and it changes the way you dance Something happens when she walks into the room.

You're going to be able to do things you've never done before. Because she doesn't come in that often, so when she does, you know . . .

BDG: Is it fear and trembling?

Vogt: Yes, a little bit, yes. Because she's very direct, very honest, very forthright.

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Directness, toughness, raw energy: these three qualities emerge integrally from the fact that JB and her artistic institutions were weaned on the Philadelphia attitude. It's a resilience and savvy born partly out of living in the shadow of the Big Apple, whose footprint is large and often overbearing. Philadelphia and its arts communities, both black and white, have developed their own strategies for maintaining balance and ground, despite the pull of New York gravity. No need to dilly-dally in this city that's often regarded as an outpost of something bigger and more spectacular just seventy miles away. As Rennie Harris said, it's a tough city and, if you can make it here, you'll be able to make it anywhere. Harris feels that this city pushes artists "to the brink. They get pushed to wherever their top is gonna be. 'Cause you have to, here. If not, you're not gonna make it with being mediocre."

Harris talked about JB's targeted aesthetic in a way that shows his deep appreciation of her directness, as the following anecdote attests:

She is very direct. There's nothing to fall back on. You don't get to contemplate and think about what she meant. You're fat, you need to lose some weight: that's it! Whatever the situation is. [He laughs heartily] In a sort of summer program she does, she pulled my whole class out, kids I had, and said "All of you go to the bathroom and put deodorant on!" You know, like there's no middle ground, and that's how I like it. That's what I respect about her and you can tell that [is the status quo] in Danco because it's not a lot of conversation. She's like "so and so"—boom—that's it. Feelings are hurt, and they pick up their feelings and keep going. . . . That's what's dope about Danco: it's a "knock-it-out-in-the-park" relationship That's what confirms them as dancers. The directness: "Let's get to the point. Why are you playing around? I don't got time for excuses. If you're here, do it or don't." As simple as that.

Like, you know, when she said to me, she just said to me, "I want you to choreograph for my company. This is how much money I have. Can you do it?" Literally, just like that, as she was walking through the hallway with a toothpick in her mouth! And I said "Okay." Straight. It wasn't like, "let's talk."

Unlike a mega company such as AAADT, Philadanco can still negotiate on this grassroots level and produce jewels of choreography and performance via a direct-contact business style, rather than a more corporate-savvy New York model. What is remarkable is that, in these two interactions with Philadelphia choreographers, JB actually combined her directness with total artistic freedom for the dance makers. She wasn't tampering with Booker's conception, only pushing him to be better in one small section that could change and strengthen his dance. And Harris said that, in creating *The Philadelphia Experience*, Brown left him alone, only occasionally dropping in to see the work in progress and make specific, limited comments about certain things (mainly the music).

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Next on my list is *Precision*, a word frequently used in describing Danco's impeccably on-point work. Turning again to the press, this word was used and quoted earlier in the section on strong technical training. In another year and another context, the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer touched on what I'm getting at:

You can think of them as the ultimate inexhaustible speed demons of modernism, but velocity and stamina are just the most obvious hallmarks of the dancers belonging to the 29-year-old, Philadelphia-based institution known as Philadanco. *Precision* is another, for even if they look permanently on overdrive, their onrush of dancing delivers the sharpest freeze-frames imaginable: *poses and movement accents of perfect clarity*.^{xxi} [emphases mine]

In one of my interviews with her, JB said she knew from the start that her African American dancers would be judged more critically than their white counterparts, given the racial tenor of our great nation. Therefore, they'd have to be more than perfect, giving 150% just to be considered on a par with their contemporaries. This is why JB rehearses her dancers like the Clydesdales Manning St. Charles jokingly alluded to. She insists that her dancers are clear, direct, to the point or, in a word, precise.

Do-or-Die Dancing is another component of rigorous professionalism. In their New York debut at the Joyce Theater in celebration of their 20th anniversary, the company was roundly praised by the critics. Among her many insightful comments, Jennifer Dunning said, "But most of all, the performers dance as if possessed, and that sense of stimulation is infectious."^{xxii} This quality is a function of all the others—roughness, raw energy, strong technical training, ensemble emphasis, directness, precision—but it also encompasses something else: a love of movement. JB declares, "Everyone can kick and twirl now. I look for a magic, a sense that they love to dance—that they have a love affair with the audience—that catches my eye."^{xxiii} And that's the quality that inspired the phrase, "kinetic empathy," from the *NY Times's* Anna Kisselgoff. With similar sentiment, Marilyn Jackson, reviewing the company in the June 2, 2000 issue of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, wrote, "To see dancers perform at this level at the end of a program is to know what professionalism and heart are." Again, they were at their "do-or-die" best, having already performed Walter Nicks's *Trance Atlantic*, Milton Myers's *Echoes*, David Brown's *Labess II*, and concluding with the dance to which she refers, Ronald Brown's *Gatekeepers*. This aura of heart—or love, or kinetic empathy—is where the buck stops, for the Danco dancer. It is a tangible quotient in Danco concerts and a reflection of the expressive, emotive element prevalent in most forms of African and African American/Diasporan arts. Elisabeth Bell said that JB always reminded them what the bottom line was: "It's *you* on the stage!" Love, compassion, and *passion* are integral components of the Philadanco brand of dancing.

Returning to Jennifer Dunning, in reviewing the company in 1999, she aptly characterized it as "... known for its provocative modern-dance repertory and its do-or-die dancing" and credited it with combining "... a fierce appetite for dance, an

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appreciation of dance history and a coolly knowing approach to movement.”^{xxiv} Again, Dunning got it right: the work ethic tempered by heart and soul.

The company’s strong *work ethic*, revisited here, is part and parcel of do-or-die dancing. The *Backstage* review, mentioned earlier, reinforces my claim and speaks to the rigorous professionalism of this organization. The critic described Milton Myers’s *Variation #1* as having “immediately established the discipline, incredible balance, impeccable form, and staying power of the Philadanco dancers.”^{xxv} Staying power: yes! Another critic, praising JB for cultivating “top-notch talent,” quipped, “For this is ‘The Little Company That Could,’ always full of energy and self-determination.”^{xxvi}

Elisabeth Bell addressed the work of being a Danco dancer, reminiscing on studying with Delores Brown (Ballet), Pat Thomas (Graham technique) and Milton Myers (Horton technique) in the classes company members are required to take, conservatory style:

It kind of reminded me of still being in training school. Mondays is Horton. Tuesday is Graham based. And Wednesday is ballet. And not wearing “junk.” [Note: dancers frequently wear layers—leg warmers, ankle warmers, sweaters, sweatpants, etc. to class to protect their muscles. These layers hide the body and prevent teachers from seeing if the dancer is correctly articulating movement.] Wanting to be able to see your body. . . . and that was the big thing, just having a truly regimented work ethic so that we could get the end results [we wanted].

Bell goes on to explain that, in order to learn her parts, she was obliged to “do my homework,” working out dance passages in her living room, or in the house where she was babysitting (her second job) or, occasionally, in the Danco studios. “That whole dedication of doing your homework and doing the extra, I know that JB definitely respected the dancers that she could see did their homework, and she definitely made it clear that she was disappointed when she felt that you were not doing your homework.”

5) *A show business élan on the concert stage.* We could actually include this principle as part of Philadanco’s rigorous professionalism, but I’ve chosen to tease it out as a separate strand. This is a Danco aesthetic that has been praised and also criticized. There are those in our profession who draw a line between so-called art and so-called entertainment and rue the day that the latter is displayed on the concert stage, a space reserved for “high art.” But here is Joan Myers Brown, who began her professional career as a ballerina, moved on to become a show dancer and choreographer, and then established a dance academy and a modern dance company. It makes sense that she brings all these talents to bear in the repertory she chooses for her company. In her fifteen-plus years of touring with, performing in and choreographing for top-drawer show business revues, she acquired crucial skills in putting together an evening’s entertainment. Make no mistake: her savvy in

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pleasing the audience is always grounded in solid values and high standards. Interviewed in 1995 by Christopher Reardon, she said, of her company's performance style, "It's not a wild energy. We're a company of well-trained, highly skilled dancers. We also happen to be very exciting."^{xxvii} She makes it clear that this is a conscious choice on her part, based on decades of experience:

I go to a lot of dance concerts and a lot of them are boring. I don't like dance where you have to try to figure out what's going on . . . I think you should enjoy dance. You should enjoy movement. I like my dancers to make the audience feel good when they leave . . . so that people can enjoy, and just feel that it's something good they've been a part of. Critics don't often agree with me, but my audiences feel that way.^{xxviii}

This is the voice of one who knows her public, and knows that the public has the final say in the life or death of an arts organization like Philadanco. Although she gives choreographers free artistic rein in creating works for her dancers, JB has been known to argue their wishes for costuming in favor of adding more glamour. Ronald K. Brown wanted simple beige camp shirts and twill pants as the costumes for his magnificent work, *Gatekeepers*. This was not JB's vision and became a sticking point, although some middle ground was finally reached. (The costumes are beige, but fashioned into more attractive, dancier versions.) Similarly, the Jawole Willa Jo Zollar version of her *Batty Moves* was reconceived for Danco as *The Walkin, Talkin, Signifying Blues Hips, Sacred Hips, Lowdown Throwdown*. The two versions are as different as the two titles. *Batty Moves*, on Zollar's Urban Bush Women, is done in black spandex running shorts and matching tank tops, with white UBW tee-shirts tied around the dancers' buttocks: this is postmodernism, straight-up and to the point. The Danco costumes are an array of bright colored shorts, tight fitting pants, midriff-baring tops, with each dancer in this all-female work wearing a uniquely individualized, tantalizing costume. This is show biz-meets-postmodernism!

Moreover, JB is not letting on that there are many critics who acknowledge, even celebrate, Danco's élan and seem to understand that, if dance as a concert art form is to remain alive and well, it must be open to new influences from a variety of cultural streams, including popular entertainments and *Africanist* (meaning African and African American) modes of performance. In writing about the company's New York Joyce Theater debut (1990), Jennifer Dunning's *NY Times* review opened by declaring, "Philadanco breezed into town like a fresh spring wind . . ." ^{xxix} Christopher Reardon, in 1996, characterized the company as having "a reputation for surprising an audience with their energy and grace," and praises the company for its "exhilarating elegance" and the "resilience of its esthetic."^{xxx} For Deborah Jowitt, the dancers in Talley Beatty's *Pretty Is Skin Deep, Ugly Is to the Bone* "streak, explode, and emit sparks like fireworks."^{xxxi} Words like skillful, sizzling, energetic, exhilarating, powerful, entertaining, and even gorgeous are the adjectives reached for by many critics, sometimes as put-downs but more frequently as commendations.

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6) To conclude this section on the Philadelphia dance aesthetic, a word about *African American elegance*, what I mean by that phrase, and how it plays out in the Danco worldview. This element must be taken together with the *Southern/small-town etiquette* that was mentioned earlier as a component of the overall Philly attitude. It's an Africanist principle that manifests itself across the African Diaspora, in the way peoples of African lineage pay regular attention to grooming (hair, face, nails), dress, and bodily carriage (in posture that is not too loose, not too rigid, but *cool*). So much of this elegance has inflected our American culture that we forget its origins. And we get to see manifestations of it in, for example, the flamboyant hat worn by Aretha Franklin to sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" at President Obama's inauguration ceremony in 2009. Indeed, wearing incredibly styled hats, head wraps, and hair-dos is a staple in African and African American cultures. Here in the United States this is a culture that, could it afford to, would probably embrace the most avant-garde trends in haute couture, with a decided fancy for feathers, fur, and other finery. Furthermore, many African Americans continue to dress up formally and meticulously for church, whereas many white churchgoers dress down on Sunday mornings to show how down-to-earth religion can be. Adhering to a principle of elegance involves a reverence for and honoring of the ritual of dressing up, the cosmetic adornment of the body, and the staging and design of ceremonial spaces, be they interior or exterior. This ideal, then, is part of the Danco élan and hearkens back to traditional African values. And the uniqueness and creative innovation of individual elegance is integral to this ideal. Several critics tapped into this and mention the individual beauty of Danco dancers. Theirs is an elegance that defies Eurocentric stereotypes and mainstream standards. As Tobi Tobias said, referring to Philadanco and also to the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, the Dallas Black Dance Theatre, the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance, and the Lula Washington Dance Theatre, "The dancers . . . share superb technical and emotive power as well as a confident sense of self, their human individuality not having been trained or rehearsed out of them . . . each performer presents himself as *uniquely* gorgeous." [Tobias's emphasis]^{xxxii} I quote her because the principle of African American elegance suggests being in possession of one's own sense of beauty. And to wind up this section of the chapter, I give Tobias the last word, in a review of Philadanco's Joyce season July 22-27, 1996:

Philadanco's current performers leaven formidable technique—in a mixed idiom of ballet, modern, jazz, and African dance—with unique stage personalities that reflect their rich racial mix and anatomical variety. Like the irrepressible members of a troupe far less sophisticated in experience, they exude joy in being on stage, showing off, entertaining and moving their audience.^{xxxiii}

Embodying the Aesthetic

How many girls start out wanting to be ballerinas? It's certainly not a dream belonging exclusively to little white girls. I can remember when I was ten years old,

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never having had a dance lesson, never having seen a ballet, but as soon as I saw adagio dancing on television (my family finally purchased a set in 1952), I was prancing around the living room imitating Bambi Lynn while Rod Alexander partnered her on “Your Show of Shows,” the Sid Caesar/Imogene Coca variety program. For me, this dream was pie in the sky. I didn’t have the opportunity to study dance of any kind until I was fifteen and in high school. Even so, my life was forever changed. It was too late for ballet, but I was already hooked on the modern genre.

Joan Myers Brown was closer to realizing that little-girl dream, having studied as a child, then with a renowned ballet master in her teens. She also performed frequently on the semi-professional circuit in the black Philadelphia community, but the tides of racial profiling were against her. A ballerina manqué herself, she first started a school and ten years later had it in mind to establish a black ballet company to show off the talents of her most gifted students. But Arthur Mitchell had succeeded in founding his Dance Theater of Harlem in 1969, and JB realized that there wasn’t enough room for two professional black ballet companies in the United States. Nevertheless, she was determined to create a performance outlet for her graduates and, thus, the Philadelphia Dance Company was born in 1970, a modern dance ensemble with a ballet orientation at its core.

I asked interviewees what it takes to instill the Danco style, to get a dancer to look like/become a Danco dancer. In response, the reader will hear from company members, teachers, choreographers. Many of these roles overlap—thus the concept of “recycled people.” For example, Debora Chase-Hicks began as a student at PSDA for six years before joining the training program, then advanced to the company proper, then left to dance with the Ailey ensemble, and subsequently returned to Danco to serve as rehearsal mistress. Milton Myers is both company choreographer-in-residence and company teacher. Zane Booker was a PSDA student, then a Philadanco apprentice, then a full company member; after dancing stateside and with companies abroad (Monaco and the Netherlands), he’s resettled in Philadelphia and is a choreographer and guest artist with the company. And the list goes on. The volume and quality of Philadanco’s recycled people is a unique indicator of continuity, commitment, and stability. Ultimately, the conservatory approach, upheld as tried and true by those returning Danco-ites, ensures continuity of style and acts as a shelter for maintaining the integrity of the Philadanco aesthetic.

Continuity/ the Conservatory Approach - The Philadanco style is closely linked to a ballet standard of excellence and is reinforced by a strong work ethic, including the requirement that the company members take (company) classes, regardless of the number or genre of additional classes they may have taken elsewhere on any given day. Moreover, dating back to the legacy of the 1940s-1950s, there are many opportunities for JB’s school students and junior companies (Danco 2 and D/3) to perform in their community, ensuring that the tradition and aesthetic are preserved and passed on not only in class but also practiced and refined in performance.

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Likewise, continuity is also reinforced by passion, compassion, friendship, and the Africanist principle of extended family. Again and again the word “family” was used by interviewees to describe what it’s like to work with JB’s school and company. Tracy Vogt mentions another salient characteristic of JB’s world—a woman-centered environment:

I think the greatest thing about Danco is the *energy* of Philadanco, and I think it comes from Miss Brown, you know, the passion she has for this, and having Debora Chase-Hicks as rehearsal director . . . and just the women that are around, Deborah Manning—you’re walking around and you see such *history*. These are the people that were my idols, you know, and now I’m in rehearsal with them!

JB’s dance conservatory shares similarities with a combined ballet school-performing ensemble model as well as with the more Afrocentric Katherine Dunham educational approach, in which the whole person is to be groomed for both the stage and everyday life. With a lifetime of experience as a triple-threat, meaning a woman, a dancer, and an African American, JB understood that her dancers needed to be self-sufficient and willing to “work harder than you ever thought you were going to work in your life, and be okay about that,” in Chase-Hicks’s words. Like black people in the general population, black dancers are too often scrutinized and measured up in ways that reflect the ethnocentricities and racial prejudices of white people. JB’s way of dealing with this situation is to ensure that her dancers are trained to a tee for their onstage appearances and decorously dressed and well spoken for their self-presentation in everyday life. In addition, and again referencing the Dunham model, the Danco dancers have some knowledge of the history of the dance ancestors on whose shoulders they stand. They are also trained in stagecraft. Chase-Hicks explained that dancers are assigned to oversee costumes, be responsible for the music, or help with the lights. Here is where the exigencies of a tight budget can result in dancers learning valuable backstage aspects of their art form.

Besides his role as choreographer in residence since 1986, Milton Myers teaches company classes and leads auditions. His is a bird’s eye view of the company, and he has developed a talent for listening and responding to the needs of the dancers and the organization. Looking for clues to understand how the company style is instilled and the standard maintained, I asked him to discuss the way company classes were conducted. Here’s what he said:

The company classes that I teach are geared for what they have to do. I could teach them Horton studies. I could teach them the technique. I find that I can use the technique, but it’s important that I see who they are as artists and that I continue to develop that, and not handle them as students. The training program is a bit more academic, it is the technique, it is developing, it is getting them to a certain strength, and sometimes I will say to the

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company members, “We’re working on this study and this study. If you want to come learn this, come on in.”

It is noteworthy that Myers makes this distinction. Even though the members of the company, proper, are youthful, he is careful to treat them as professionals. Though it may feel like a conservatory because they are required to take classes, it is different, because their classes are not standardized but a flexible process based on their professional needs. This is another reason why the classes are requisite: they are sessions that deal specifically with what’s going on with the dancers professionally, at that point in time. Essentially, they are companion to the rehearsal process. Myers continues,

Sometimes, and depending on what they’re doing, if they’re not touring so much, I’ll say, “Okay, study times. We need to learn this study. We need to develop this. We need to build some strength. Joan’s feeling like you’re not performing as much. She wants you stronger.” So I have to develop things to keep them at a certain level. If they’re performing and rehearsing a great deal, it’s maintenance and making sure that body is ready to do whatever Debbie Chase or Ms. Bears wants them to do. So I think that handling them as professionals is very important. . . .

He makes it clear to them that they must

take this class at a very high level, as professionals, not as students: And when they rehearse, they [Chase-Hicks and Bears-Bailey] like to keep it at a very high standard. There’s very little time for marking unless they’re exhausted. *Things really have to be danced full out, so that they can see what they’re doing, so that they can take it further. Also, the endurance level—again, there’s that fierceness. They’re rehearsed at such a state that to do three ballets is not difficult for them. These dancers are in everything and they’re dancing at top level.* [emphases mine]

One might question whether such a regimen leads to early burn-out or, on the contrary, strengthens dancer stamina, enabling them to extend their careers. Comments given by Bell and Chase-Hicks point to the stamina theory, but differences in anatomy, prior training, and personal aspirations can produce a range of responses to any particular training technique.

Hope Boykin danced with Philadanco from 1994 to 2000. As of 2009 she celebrated her ninth season with the Ailey ensemble. Like Elisabeth Bell, she talked about the class dress code: although certain extra pieces of apparel warm the muscles, they mask the dancing body and hide what the dancer is doing. As we continued talking about the company dynamics, and she told this story:

I remember once I had a note on my dressing room table and it said, “Why aren’t your costumes hung? Why isn’t your make-up table neat and clean?”

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Because when you leave here it should look how it looked when you got here.” I didn’t think anything about it—I was going to put them back on, you know, so why did it matter? Well, that’s not the point! And so now I carry these “Wet Ones” and I go into a place and I clean it before and again when I leave. It’s just the, you know, it’s the home training.

The note was from JB. It didn’t need her signature. It was clear who would be checking, even in the dressing rooms, to make sure a certain protocol was observed. (And JB’s large, bold handwriting is unmistakable. Like its author, it is clear, precise, direct.) In response to my asking how one becomes a Danco dancer, Boykin emphatically replied that repetition was the key, which sounds a lot like Manning-St. Charles’s comment about rehearsing, rehearsing, rehearsing. Boykin specified, though, that it wasn’t simply how often something was done but the quality of the repetition. This implies that the dancers must have a quick muscle memory for incorporating corrections. It reminds me of a company audition I observed. In attendance at the January 11, 2009 auditions for Philadanco, Danco 2, and the Training Program (which accommodates those promising young dancers who are not accepted in D2, the second company) I witnessed the Danco aesthetic in action.^{xxxiv} The entire event was a micro view of what it takes to be a Danco dancer. Here are my notes:

January 11, 2009: Philadanco auditions are regularly held on the second Sunday in January and June. Milton Myers teaches the first part of the audition class for D2 and the Training Program. His is a gentle, smiling approach. He goes over a long, 24-count combination—a beautiful one, yet not too complex for the abilities of this group of twelve auditionees, four of whom are white females. He’s giving them Horton technique. Donald Lunsford, Director of D2, is in attendance. Myers speaks lovingly, yet with authority. He seems to desire to get the best from them—indeed, to “e-ducare.” [I’m implying the Latin root: to bring forth what is already there.] This will be an experience they will remember.

While the audition proceeds in the company’s big second-floor studio, the Eagles-Giants game is playing on the television set down the hall in the kitchen, with the sound turned off. This reminds me of Rennie Harris’s comments about Philly and sports and that connection with the city’s ethos. One of the biggest Eagles fans is JB’s youngest daughter, Marlisa Brown-Swint, who is second in command in running the PSDA.

Fast forward to the main company audition: JB’s not in attendance, so the auditionees will be required to return on callback, since the final decisions are up to her. But Myers and Chase-Hicks will make their recommendations. This section opens with Myers’s giving a Horton technique warm-up, known by the Danco company members who form the front line of the audition. (Both sections of the audition included company members dancing in front, so that auditionees had models to follow.) This time it’s four male company members

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and Tracy Vogt, whose knowledge of the technique and the sequence is impeccable. There are eleven auditionees, all African-American, nine men and two women. Danco needs only two more men, although it's always good to have a catalog of competent back-up dancers in case of injury or other emergency. (Two men in the current roster will move on when their contracts are up.) Right now the company roster is seven men and seven women. Sometimes it's been nine and nine. One of the women was a former D2 member, left about two years ago, and is returning with hopes of joining the main ensemble.

The Danco members are dancing fully, really taking this as a class. It's interesting that in this section of the audition no one asked any questions. They picked up the movements from Myers's instructions and the ensemble's demonstrations with what I would call amazing speed. Everyone seems well prepared. And it's probable that some of these people have taken company classes before, like the former D2 member.^{xxxv}

Now, things are heating up for the second half, which Chase-Hicks videotapes (so that JB and others can review. Taping is a regular practice at all company rehearsals and is a general procedure in the dance world). There are eight men left. The two women and one man were eliminated. Chase-Hicks takes over for this section, urging on the auditionees, giving a rehearsal director's corrections, and expecting them to internalize and externalize her comments, as in, "I said, 'contract!' Use your back! I said 'attitude and plié!' I want to see my corrections used!" Meanwhile, company members are manning the camera, giving counts, demonstrating movement phrases, operating the CD machine, and being present in every sense of the phrase. In most cases, before anyone can ask questions, they are answered by Chase-Hicks's corrections.

They are dancing a very fast, intense section from Myers's Echoes. Chase-Hicks then directs them not to let her comments throw them. Even if they make a mistake, she wants to see that they can take and absorb her corrections and keep going. They practice and do and re-do this combination for a good fifteen minutes. Company member Jay Staten shows them the combination while Vogt corrects Staten's counts from the sidelines. The auditionees practice first with company members, then perform it all in a group, then in two groups, then two-by-two. In other words, the audition gives the dancers many opportunities to learn the combination and multiple occasions for the "judges" to see not only how they dance but how well they're able to absorb and manifest corrections. Again, Chase-Hicks tells them, "don't get thrown. Now, Put on a different costume, a different attitude, a different character: this is a section from a different ballet." And what follows in a section from Christopher Huggins's ballet, Blue.

By now, the entire room—ensemble members, auditionees, teachers, pianist, and guest (me!)—is grooving with the spirit of "The Dance": tapping a foot or

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patting a thigh, moving head or body to the emphatic beat of Steve Reich's percussive score. Again, Chase-Hicks warns auditionees to don a new costume and mood in preparation for a new role. They are taught a section of Gene Hill Sagan's Ritornello, to music by Bach. It's eye-opening to see these dancers being put through the kinds of paces and changes that they'd have to go through in any one Danco concert. Once more, they are given multiple opportunities to learn it, to pull it together. She is requiring them to go deeply into the movements. Having them dance with ensemble members and at times pairing an auditionee with a particular Danco dancer helps her see how the auditionee's dynamic and thrust feel and fit in the company mix.

Much of my description may obtain at auditions for other concert dance groups, but there are several noteworthy differences. First, the extent and variety of the repertory is remarkable. As Chase-Hicks put it, "a Danco dancer is separated by the repertory that they can handle." Next, the highly professional atmosphere at 9 North Preston Street is punctuated by homespun quirks—like the kitchen down the hall, with JB's grandkids having lunch while the Eagles game flickers silently onscreen—imparting to this event the ambience of a visit to a friend's home, rather than the tension associated with a professional audition. This aura was amplified by Myers's easygoing attitude. Finally, throughout the afternoon—and like everything else at Danco and the school—the feeling was upfront and personal.

Another significant part of the Danco training is the opportunity given the dancers to teach. This is an ingenious way of instilling the company aesthetic in its members. By having to teach classes, they are obliged to analyze what they do, demonstrate it so that it can be learned, and then make corrections. In learning to be good teachers, dancers learn about the art form from a new perspective. This is a lesson that JB was taught in the 1940s by her predecessors, Sydney King and Marion Cuyjet who, in the 1930s, were dance instructors at the school of their mentor, Essie Marie Dorsey, when they were her star students. Karen Still-Pendergrass began dancing with Philadanco in 1973, left the company around the time that she married vocalist and pop icon, Teddy Pendergrass (1987), but has continued to teach at PSDA, almost uninterruptedly, over the past thirty-plus years. As of 2009 when I interviewed her, she was teaching ballet to classes of hopefuls, aged 8 to 18, as well as jazz and zumba, a new Latin fitness dance technique. "I joined the company when I was twenty," she says,

and part of our training was to student-teach. I started under Aunt Joan and one day she said, 'Karen, count!' and she walked out of the room, and didn't return, and I've been teaching ever since. . . . Aunt Joan made us teach correctly. She didn't allow you to sit down and teach. You demonstrated. You danced with the students. And you taught technique correctly. It wasn't just about coming and learning combinations. She had a standard of teaching, a level, and if you didn't hold to that standard, she'd embarrass you right in front of your students!

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For Tracy Vogt, the experience was heightened by JB pairing her on a teaching assignment with Kim Bears-Bailey:

I had never really taught dance before. And as soon as I got here, JB had me go with Kim to teach master classes. And I *know* how important that class was, because it changed my life, to be doing it with Kim, to be trained by this *amazing* teacher, because Kim is an *amazing, incredible* teacher. . . . And I gained that skill, that I didn't have before I came here, and now I teach all over the place!

The leaders of this company-conservatory are a community of like spirits working in consonance toward ensemble excellence, individual ascendance, and maintaining (as well as extending) the aesthetic integrity of Philadanco. Sometimes it can mean putting in extra time and doing one's homework, as Elisabeth Bell recalled. Bell also mentioned how important it is to take classes and have what she termed "a truly regimented work ethic" so that the dancer's technique is tight and injuries, always a hazard, are kept to a minimum. The stronger one's technique and the more she refines it by taking class as a daily practice, the less likely she is to suffer injury or, at least, the more likely to recover.

Another facet of the conservatory approach, or training the whole artist and the whole person, is a tradition called "Danco on Danco," wherein the company dancers who are interested in choreography have the opportunity to try out their ideas on dancers in D2 or the training company. I could have discussed this initiative in this section, since it is an educational component of JB'S institution. However, I have chosen, instead, to include it in the section on choreographers.

Continuity/ Aesthetic Issues – The following anecdote recounted by Bell illustrates the disappointments and tribulations sometimes involved in "getting" the Danco style:

There was a time when I had . . . the most mortifying solo I've ever done, in Lynn Taylor Corbett's *Everything is Everything*. Joan was, like, "Elisabeth, you need to be living in the studio!" That's when it's hard, especially if you're frustrated with yourself, it's like, you can only do something 20 times and still not get it Finally I had to share with her that I was hitting a wall 'Elisabeth is not a person who doesn't take her job seriously': that was the one thing I needed to let her know. 'And because I'm not rising to expectations at this particular moment, please just don't for a second think I'm not taking this seriously.' But I had to let her know I'm hitting a wall because, clearly, certain things aren't happening. So that's when she showed me exactly what I needed to do. She even showed it on her body. We worked, we worked, we worked through that solo. Now, my personality is to be non-confrontational and to avoid certain things; I'm just not wanting to hear certain things. I will avoid! But once I had this moment with her, it released a tension. The solo was not made for me [That is, this work had been created

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originally with other dancers.] But still, after I had this moment with her, I was able to find something.

Bell cites this instance as a particularly trying time for her during her Danco tenure. The ballet was to be performed at the Joyce Theater in New York City, one of the most important bookings in a Philadanco stateside season. Had she been unable to “get” it, the role would have gone to someone else. Usually Chase-Hicks would be the person to work out the kinks or, as Bell put it, “. . . to hold onto the integrity of everything.” And when a person is learning a new part, the rehearsal director works in a very detail-oriented way to teach it fully and correctly. “Ms. Chase is fabulous and will still get up out of the chair and [do a phrase],” says Bell, “And when you see her do it, you realize that’s why she is who she is.” Only once in a while, as in this example, must the ‘maestra’ step in. Again attesting to why Chase-Hicks “is who she is,” Tracy Vogt explained that the “big coach” will “coach you down and a lot of times what happens when you first get into the company is, the company will go on tour and those that are new stay with Miss Chase and they rehearse with her privately.” These are all processes to ensure the quality of the performance style and the setting of the Danco aesthetic properly and integrally on its dancers.

Bell gave a “what-if” to illustrate the difference between JB’s role and Chase Hicks’s:

Often JB will have a stretch of time before she sees a particular piece. [For example,] she’s seen *Gatekeepers* tons of times. If she now sees that we’re about to do a show at 8 o’clock and we rehearse at 3, and she sees you marking something [instead of dancing full out] . . . then, of course, she’ll definitely say something. But definitely the day-to-day, the whole point of getting you ready to be on the stage: that is completely Ms. Chase.

Debora Chase-Hicks sets her heart, mind, and body on the line in the service of “getting it right.” Like everyone else at the Danco/PSDA complex, she practically lives at 9 North Preston Street, home to the school and the ensemble. (In their honor this small West Philadelphia street was actually renamed “Philadanco Way” by the city of Philadelphia in 1995). In addition to company classes in ballet, Horton, and Graham techniques Monday through Wednesday, the dancers rehearse with Chase-Hicks for two hours Monday through Wednesday, five hours on Saturdays, and three to four hours Sundays, with Thursdays and Fridays their days off. Admitting that she may be “. . . a little prejudiced,” she asserts with smiling confidence that “. . . as far as I’m concerned, we produce more phenomenal, more well-rounded dancers than any other company.” Asked how a new company member becomes a Danco dancer, she responded,

It’s a lot of talking. For this generation you have to break it down to the nines. I thank computers for that—they don’t have to think for themselves anymore, they just hit ENTER! But, seriously, it’s about consistency—consistently doing things over and over. Now you try this one and do it again and again. And now try this and push a little bit more. *But it’s all about*

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consistency, because you get to a level where they don't even realize it will never go below that level anymore because it is consistent. And then you layer it after that. (emphasis mine)

This statement was a revelation to me, exposing a facet of dancer's intelligence, muscle memory, and *embodied wisdom* that I'd never before heard articulated in this unromantic, nuts-and-bolts fashion. It's all about "The Work": and transcendence is a result of consistency in The Work. Once you get it under your belt, then you can add complexity (or layering). Chase-Hicks also pointed out the importance of dancing full out at rehearsals, rather than marking the movement. Through full-body dancing the level she talked about can be attained. And sometimes it means that something beyond technique is needed to carry the dancer through, which Chase-Hicks describes as, ". . . that power, and that spirit . . . that's sitting on the outside, that's so intense, it's coming out, just sitting on the outside of your skin, just burning!" Now, this spirit is not something taught by studying with anyone. It's that ineffable quotient that JB looks for when she auditions dancers—the sense that they must dance, or they will die for the lack of it. Another recycled person, former Danco dancer and now the company General Manager, Vanessa Thomas-Smith used the word, *drive*, to talk about this Philadanco quality. She asserted that JB "reads very well . . . almost like a therapist," in terms of spotting and choosing the dancers who, beyond their technical abilities (which must be excellent) are "artistically driven to do this work." The Danco dancer is taught by Chase-Hicks, Milton Myers, Pat Thomas, Delores Brown-Abelson, Kim Bears-Bailey, and JB to refine, hone, and channel that power. As Bears-Bailey claimed, "These are people who understand the essence and the beauty of what makes Philadanco what it is. It's not somebody just coming in to give a class."

Kim Bears-Bailey is probably the person who is closest to JB in terms of aims, means and aesthetics. She is JB's right hand woman, sounding board, confidante, and surrogate daughter all rolled into one calm, centered bundle of vital though contained energy. Her presence is felt in every creative-artistic aspect of the day-to-day operations of Philadanco. Also a full-time dance professor at Philadelphia's University of the Arts, she lives a double life, sometimes seeming to be in two or more places at once. Her statements shed additional light on understanding this ensemble and how its past intersects with and is embraced by its present. Speaking passionately and from the vantage point of having danced with the company, taught classes, assisted at rehearsals and performances, and now as the company's Assistant Artistic Director, she said,

There is a look of Philadanco—polished women, strong men—there's that thing that people relate to in Philadanco, but it's not one kind [of person, or look]. It's many kinds that become a part of this unit, that find the open window and the little pearl inside of their shell that, for some reason, maybe in another place and time, wasn't as accessible for them. . . .
When I was in the company we did seven to nine pieces [in one performance]. So I got to be nine different people, I got to explore nine

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different beauties of my soul, my spirit, through different choreographers in one concert. When I got my Bessie^{xxxvi}, we premiered nine works at the Joyce Theater. The concert was two hours. But you got to say so much, you got to find so many aspects of yourself through the works. And now it's funny, 'cause the kids are doing three and four ballets and they're dying in the wings. . . . But also the pieces are getting longer.

With these accounts by Bears-Bailey and Chase-Hicks, we are made aware of an issue around the stamina and loyalty of the millennial dancer that did not exist in the eighties and early nineties. Dancers in the company are no longer all or even principally from Philadelphia. Instead of remaining with the company for seven or more years, the average stay now is generally three to five years, with a few exceptions. Nevertheless, through the continuity offered by people like Bears-Bailey, the remarkable and unique capability of creating an ensemble of highly individual dancers is preserved, and Danco is still unmistakably Danco.

Continuity/Choreographers^{xxxvii} –I asked Chase-Hicks to break down for the reader the interaction between choreographer, artistic director, and rehearsal mistress. She took it from the top, explaining that the conversation begins with artistic director JB and a particular choreographer. If it is a new piece the discussion centers on what it's about. If the choreographer is remounting a piece on the company (either done by another company or in previous years by Philadanco), they would have screened a video, with discussion ensuing as to how the work needs to be conceived, given the Philadanco aesthetic and the particular dancers in the company at this time. Chase-Hicks continued,

So that's done before the choreographer comes into the studio. Once the choreographer comes in, basically Aunt Joan doesn't come in. She's already done that, and that's the beauty of it. She allows them to do what they do. And while they are choreographing, I generally sit up on the ladder and videotape^{xxxviii}. . . . If I'm watching something and I can help the dancers along I'll try to very discreetly say something to them so that it keeps the process going for the choreographer. I usually say to them [the choreographer] prior [to the rehearsal period] 'I don't want to overstep your bounds, is it okay if I see a dancer and can help them do something to get where you want them—I just kind of pull them off to the side and help?' And they [the choreographers] always say yes, because the time is always limited.

I comment on the fact that choreographers trust her eye and expertise. She responds how wonderful that has been, working with choreographers from all over the world who don't know anything about her but believe that she will take the time to

really watch and try to get a handle on their style and their process, because each choreographer has a different process. Some come in and teach thirty-

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two counts and then manipulate those counts in fifty thousand ways, or some will teach eight counts and take two days to get to that, to the way they want it to look. Everyone is different, and I have to get a feel for them, and they have to get a feel for me. I have to build their trust, because it really is their vision, their baby.

JB then returns at the end of the process. Chase-Hicks's role shifts, accordingly, with her sitting next to the artistic director and the choreographer, taking notes for them,

so then I kind of have, not the view from the back, but the view from the front, and I can also hear what they want, and then I ask questions, and we have our dialogue after the rehearsal's over. That [dialogue] kind of carries on into the tech rehearsal, the premiere, and the whole run. Whatever the run is, we always have our dialogue after the shows.

Based on these discussions, she takes notes for herself, for JB, and for the choreographer after a performance, goes over the notes with them, gives them her notes,

and they say, 'Well, that's not important,' and I say, 'Oh, yeah: right.' So we have that give and take. Then, after they leave^{xxxix}, it really is my responsibility, first of all, to hang on to the vision, to hang on to the style, to hang on to the clarity, to try to hang on to the story and then to help the dancers find their way in it. And [show them] how to then grow in it as a dancer, as a performer, as an artist

My greatest responsibility is to keep the ballets intact and to help the dancers mold into that style, because then they can recognize all kinds of styles and be able to do all types of things, and then it opens the door for a career.

For JB, the introduction of each new choreographic work is calculated not only to add to the company's repertory but also to expand its reach, scope, and expertise. For its first bona fide performance seasons in the mid-1970s the group performed works made by JB herself and her old buddies Billy Wilson (who was soon on his way to fame as an internationally renowned choreographer for dance companies, Broadway, and television)^{xl} and Harold Pierson, both now deceased.^{xli} By 1977 the first Talley Beatty work, *Pretty is Skin Deep. . . Ugly is to the Bone*, was added. In 1979 Gene Hill Sagan made his first appearance with *La Valse*. By the 1980s the list of choreographers and range of approaches was staggering. As Bears-Bailey attested, sometimes there were upwards of nine (short) works on a program. (see appendices of Repertory Chronology and Brief Choreographer Biographies)

One of the ways that this artistic director develops home grown choreographers is through "Danco on Danco," a tradition that began with the early days of Philadanco itself. JB explains that it started when the Painted Bride Arts Center, presently a 250-seat black box theater, was a storefront performance space founded in 1969 and located on South Street, next to a bridal shop in South Central Philadelphia,

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which is how the Center got its name. Gerry Givnish, one of the founders and the original Executive Director, asked her to do a performance. Because it was such a small space, she came up with the idea of letting the dancers make pieces on one another instead of launching a full-blown, full-ensemble performance. This has become a regular autumn tradition. Zane Booker, Hope Boykin, and several other Danco dancers who now make dances for Danco and other major companies, began their professional exposure as choreographers through this outlet. Now that Booker, along with Bears-Bailey, is a dance professor at the University of the Arts, the dancers for these concerts include U Arts dance majors, members of D/2 and the training program, as well as members of Philadanco. What is wonderful is the opportunity given all around: for new choreographers to experiment in public; for dance majors to dance with professionals; for people, some of whom will never become professional performers, to have this opportunity to experience the magic of performing in a fully-realized situation, as opposed to a school recital or a college-level concert.

Attending the Danco on Danco performance of October 22, 2009, I was thrilled to see the range of different young physical types working together, making unity out of potential chaos, even with their unseasoned, individuated bodies. Their teachers are giving them that important “we’re all in this together” Danco lesson, while not robbing them of their unique talents. What I saw in these young dancers—students and D2 members—was the raw energy of “The Dance Impulse” incarnate, the do-or-die quality, wherein dance is a need beyond a mere desire. Dancers-in-the-rough exposed their simultaneous grace and awkwardness, agility and inflexibility. Sometimes we spectators could see a reach beyond a grasp, a young mind too big for a body and then, gloriously, sometimes it all fit. This is exciting stuff to see onstage and the atmosphere takes on a life of its own, with the ability to draw the audience in its embrace. In some cases we could imagine a dancer growing into a particular choreography over time, with a dance becoming an imaginary dress that could be tried on every year or so, to continue to adjust the fit. We were privileged to see the seed of potential that is sought after in the dancer who will be accepted into the company, and to feel the dynamic energy that Bears-Bailey, Booker, Myers, and others are nurturing and grooming through their teaching and choreography. And the variety of styles and genres—from ballet and traditional modern to jazz, African, and hip hop—allow the young dancers to experience, in front of an audience, the diversity of the Danco repertory and to be in an onstage and backstage rehearsal-performance period with actual members of the senior company. They are gaining experience in what it means to be professional, in the Danco sense of variety, energy, and endurance. All in all, and like most Danco and PSDA events, the entire concert rocked with the feeling of family—parents, babies, kids, friends, teachers, mentors, students—all rooting for the new dancers and the burgeoning choreographers. And holding it all together was the cool, assured, but loving and generous presence of the woman who created this baby: namely, JB, who introduced and concluded the show with a few choice words in her down-to-earth, cogent style.

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I asked Tracy Vogt to talk about working with any of the Danco choreographers whose dances she'd performed in. She chose Danny Ezralow and Milton Myers as two with whom she had had memorable interactions. (See Appendix of Choreographers' Biographies) With Ezralow it was her first experience working completely from improvisation:

He would have us rolling around on each other and it made the company get very close because it was around Christmas time, and we were sharing what Christmas meant to us. One day we went on a "field trip" to Fresh Grocer [a large supermarket around the corner from Philadanco Way that carries produce, prepared foods, and has a café on the premises], and I was like, 'Who is this man???' And then he made a solo for me, an improv. He'd make us improvise, and he kept yelling, 'Stop! You're thinking too much! Walk around!' And I'd walk in a circle, start dancing, and he'd stop me again for thinking. I had to walk in a circle and just go with whatever came to me. Oddly enough, the solo became "New Year's Eve," the Christmas solo that so many people love! He added men coming in and doing little lifts, and then leaving me, and I just remember being so angry and just kind of flopping around, and people loved it!

The dance she described belongs to the *Xmas Philes*, which was choreographed by Ezralow on the company, through improvisation, in 2005. It was a new experience for Vogt and other company members who were used to a technique-based style of choreography. But leave it to JB to widen Danco horizons, undoubtedly aware that, as a company dominated by African Americans and headed by a black woman, they were stepping out of stereotypical aesthetic boundaries by doing an experimental piece like this. Vogt also talked about working with Milton Myers, whom she knew from the University of the Arts, where he had been one of her favorite teachers:

And, you know, getting into the company, they don't feed you into the rep right away, unless you're cast into a choreographer's new work, and Milton cast me in *Echoes*, a tribute to Alvin Ailey. He gave me a great part, and I was so ecstatic because he had trained me, and I felt like he trusted me to do this work, and we toured that work for quite a long time.

Elisabeth Bell also mentioned Myers as a favorite choreographer. His easygoing manner, combined with his technical expertise and artistic talent, are an inviting combination. Ezralow and Myers belong to the branch of Danco choreographers who are not exactly in the same generation but are closer in age to the dancers than choreographers like Louis Johnson and the late Talley Beatty, who adhered to a more hierarchical rehearsal format. But the new generation could not have developed without standing on the shoulders of these aesthetic ancestors.

For Zane Booker, the transition from student to company member to company choreographer wasn't always an easy one. As a dance maker he didn't have an edge, or any particular favor, with JB, and was obliged to demonstrate his mettle, even

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though he'd known, studied with, and danced for her since he was seven years old. He explains that "When I mentioned to Aunt Joan that I wanted to choreograph on the company for the Danco on Danco series, she was like, "Well, we'll see," but it wasn't like, "Okay, I'll work that out for you." So the challenge was to go ahead and get better as a choreographer.

After funding priorities, it's the aesthetic choices, constancy, and creativity that are front and center issues in keeping a dance company alive and well. Another statement by Booker, who has known the company, the school, and their founder for almost all of his life, is a fitting way to draw this chapter to an end:

Aunt Joan is the keeper of the standard. Just her presence in the doorway creates a push without words. I felt that when she came into the room, when I was sitting in front of the room as a choreographer: the push towards excellence. Her eye is so amazing. She stays current. She sees everything, and understands good structure, understands that somebody is not a choreographer or that somebody is a choreographer, as far as how you use space, how you use form, how you generate patterns on the stage. All of those things that go into the craft of choreography, she appreciates that and she can call you on it. So her presence in the room pushes towards that standard.

Having established the premises of the Philadanco/Philadelphia dance aesthetic, the responsibility of the choreographer in "the house that Joan built" will be taken up from another vantage point in the next chapter.

NOTES

ⁱ Dan DeLuca, "Late Night with The Roots," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sunday, April 12, 2009, pp. H1, H15.

ⁱⁱ In this section I concentrate on articles and reviews written in the 1990s, when the company had their New York City debut and when their unique style and aesthetic became a marketable commodity. The 1970s-early 1980s was their initiation; the late 1980s-1990s the gelling of the Danco aesthetic. The new millennium is the icing on the cake.

ⁱⁱⁱ The city of Philadelphia is situated on the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers.

^{iv} Phone conversation with Nadine Patterson, November, 2008. She continued in this vein, saying "Philadanco is like a character dance company. They can assume various characters and inhabit these different characters—which are the choreographers in their dances—very completely. Whereas other companies, they have their star status, they have their one thing that they do, and it's like watching Tom Hanks and he's always Tom Hanks, you know—or [Robert] De Niro."

^v Terry Gross, "Fresh Air," interview with Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, National Public Radio, November 26, 2008.

^{vi} Anna Kisselgoff, "Diverse 2d [sic] Program By Philadanco," *New York Times*, April 15, 1990, p.143.

^{vii} n. p. - no page number available.

^{viii} Some of its athletes develop a deep devotion to the city. Floridian footballer Brian Dawkins wept on camera when he left the Eagles after the 2008 season to play for the Denver Broncos. Likewise, Virginia-born basketball star Allen Iverson was visibly shaken as he expressed gratitude for being

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rehired by the Philadelphia 76ers in December 2009, after he'd been traded to the Denver Nuggets in December 2006.

^{ix} MOVE was a Philadelphia grassroots collective founded by John Africa. All members used "Africa" as their surname and espoused a "back-to-roots" philosophy and lifestyle. In 1985 the Philadelphia Police Department dropped a bomb on the group's headquarters, located in an African American residential neighborhood, resulting in the destruction of sixty-odd homes and the deaths of almost all MOVE members.

^x Ann Dunn, "The Philadanco Story," *The [Asheville] Arts Journal*, February 1989, p.23

^{xi} Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion*, UC Berkeley Press, 1974

^{xii} Martha Graham (1894-1991), Katherine Dunham (1919-2006) and Lester Horton (1906-1953) are major international forces in dance. Each one was renowned as dancer, teacher, choreographer and educator. Each created, evolved and codified her/his own specific modern dance technique, and all three techniques are still taught in dance studios and departments around the world. Many contemporary choreographers are indebted to one or more of these techniques in evolving their own styles.

^{xiii} The ballet style taught by Tudor and adopted by JB is the world-renowned Cecchetti technique, named after Enrico Cecchetti (1850-1928), the Italian ballet master for the Diaghilev Ballets Russes who later opened a school in London. Ballet techniques generally utilize the same basic foot patterns, arm motions, and turns that were institutionalized by Carlo Blasis (1797-1878), who codified the technique in the early 19th century. But that classical basis has been interpreted differently by subsequent eras of practitioners, including Cecchetti, Agrippina Vaganova (1879-1951), George Balanchine (1904-1983), and others. One of Cecchetti's London students was Margaret Craske (1892-1990), a name familiar to the 20th century generation of ballet professionals. Tudor (1908-1987) was one of a cadre of British dancers to whom Craske passed on the Cecchetti legacy.

^{xiv} Jennifer Dunning, "Philadelphia Troupe Makes Its New York Debut," *New York Times*, Thursday April 14, 1990

^{xv} Jennie Schulman, "Philadanco: Exuberance at the Joyce," *Backstage*, August 9, 1996, n.p.

^{xvi} Patricia Calnan, "Dance Ensemble Soars on City hall Stage," *The Royal Gazette*, Wednesday, February 4, 1998, p.18

^{xvii} This holds true for choreographers who set movement on dancers with the intention of having it reproduced as it was created. Contemporary choreographers who work collaboratively and/or through dancer improvisation adhere to a different criterion.

^{xviii} Calnan, *ibid.*

^{xix} Deborah Jowitt, "On Fire," *Village Voice*, July 11, 1995, n.p., reviewing Danco at the Joyce, June 20-25)

^{xx} Alice Naude, "Sweet Silver," *Dance Magazine*, October 1995, pp.96-97

^{xxi} Lewis Segal, "High-Speed Wonders," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1999, p.F3

^{xxii} Jennifer Dunning, "Philadelphia Troupe Makes Its New York Debut," *New York Times*, April 12, 1990, p.C13.

^{xxiii} Susan Isaacs Nisbett, "A Dynamic Debut," *The Ann Arbor News*, June 21, 2001 n.p.

^{xxiv} Jennifer Dunning, "A Do-or-Die Essence Fed by Love," *New York Times*, August 21, 1999, pp. B9, B15.

^{xxv} Jennie Schulman, "Philadanco: Exuberance at the Joyce," *Backstage*, August 9, 1996, n.p.

^{xxvi} Jane Vranish, "Fierce Dancers of Philadanco Make 'Sneak Preview' Come Alive," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 6, 1999, n.p.

^{xxvii} Christopher Reardon, "Philadanco Smolders Quietly On the Edges of Dance Fame," *The Christian Science Monitor*, Monday, July 3, 1995, p. 12

^{xxviii} Ann Dunn, cited above

^{xxix} Jennifer Dunning, "Philadelphia Troupe Makes Its New York Debut," *New York Times*, April 12, 1990, p.C13.

^{xxx} Christopher Reardon, "Philadanco Finds Ways to Make a Virtue of Flux," *NY Times*, Sunday, July 14, 1996, p. H7.

^{xxxi} Deborah Jowitt, "On Fire," *Village Voice*, July 11, 1995, n.p.

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^{xxxii} Tobi Tobias, "Wonder Women," *New York* [magazine], December 1, 1997, p.126

^{xxxiii} Tobi Tobias, "Prime Time," *Village Voice*, August 20, 1996

^{xxxiv} The Instruction and Training Program is the overall umbrella for training dance hopefuls between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three. These students may audition for Danco/2, the junior performing group. A six-week annual summer program is held for students aged nine to sixteen, most who will study at PSDA for the rest of the year. Youngsters aged nine through twelve are eligible to be accepted into D/3, the pre-teen performing group. Although this system omits a performance opportunity for youth aged thirteen through sixteen, they are nevertheless able to study at PSDA and perform in the annual spring recital. If they continue at the school, like some of today's auditionees, then they may audition for D/2 or, if not accepted into that ensemble, be accepted into the Instruction and Training Program.

^{xxxv} According to former Danco dancer/present General Manager Vanessa Thomas-Smith, there's some measured thought and calculation that goes into a dancer's decision to audition for Philadanco. It's not taken lightly: "When they get to the point where they want to audition for Philadanco," she claims, "they know they have to come with some special sparkle, some special flare. Most of the people who have come to audition I believe have seen the company [perform]. They're getting their degrees or they're professional. They've already got the fever for that type of dance . . . so when they go to audition, they already have that mental mechanism in place. *There are people that are in the company now who auditioned two, three, four, five times, and they finally got in the company. . . . They tried again, because that's where they felt they belonged.*" [emphasis mine]

^{xxxvi} The New York Dance and Performance Awards, annually awarded for creative achievement in dance and dance-related performance, is informally known as the "Bessies," honoring the late Bessie Schonberg, a beloved teacher of choreography and head of the Sarah Lawrence College Dance Department for several decades. Bears-Bailey was awarded a Bessie in 1992.

^{xxxvii} In this chapter I discuss the Danco choreographers inasmuch as their participation reflects the company aesthetic. They will be discussed again in the following chapter from other perspectives.

^{xxxviii} The ladder is about nine feet high. Shooting from that vantage point, Chase-Hicks is able to track the path and pattern of a dance and/or focus in on particulars.

^{xxxix} Generally, choreographers depart after the opening night.

^{xl} Including the Broadway hit, "Bubblin' Brown Sugar," 1976. See appendix of choreographer biographies.

^{xli} See appendix of choreographer biographies.